

*Chandernagor*  
Recognizing Alternative  
Discourses on the Colonial



Arghya Bose

Foreword by Basabi Pal

Avenel Press

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*Composed by : AdSonata*

*This copy of the book belongs to you.  
Every copy, however, belongs to*

MY MOTHER –

*to whom this book is affectionately dedicated,  
for being a mother demands a dedication far  
exceeding that authoring this book has,*

*or any other*

*will, ever require...*



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## **Foreword**

The 1950s-60s had seen the systematic and amiable transfer of sovereignty in the French Establishments in India from the French Republic to the newly constituted Republic of India. In merging with the Indian subcontinent, the residents of French India had preferred the ties of race, culture and common blood in deciding a future for themselves that had been, and would be, for the foreseeable time to come, inseparably interwoven with the fate of the greater Indian subcontinent. However, over the last three centuries, these establishments had developed a unique sense of individual identity owing to the fact that they were colonized by a nation which was not only different but also antagonistic to the one which eventually came to dominate the entirety of the Indian subcontinent.

Chandernagor, the sole of the French establishments in Northern India, had developed its own peculiar identity of Franco-Bengali heritage over these three hundred years. Culturally close to the rest of Bengal and politically distant from the same, the identity of Chandernagor had evolved to be one not only dissimilar from the rest of Bengal but also from the rest of the French establishments in South India. When Chandernagor raised its demands for independence, and eventually merged with the Union of India through the province of West Bengal in 1954, it had,

though not without pain, chosen to prioritize Indian national integration over the peculiarities of its socio-cultural individuality. Both the French authorities in India like Bertheux and the Indian ones, particularly Nehru, had envisioned Pondichéry and Chandernagor as Indo-French cultural centres – as ‘windows into France in India’. The then Governor of Bengal, Shri Rajagopal Acharia had however warned – ‘Perhaps one day, Chandernagor will merge into Bengal, but if we do not remember its tradition, Chandernagor will lose all its glory’.

This appears more than true than ever today. While the town today is a part of India, and very proudly so, there has also been a systematic blow to the individuality of Chandernagor’s identity in the subcontinent. A mere over sixty years since the French made their final exit from Chandernagor, the memories of this shared Indo-French history is gradually, but certainly getting effaced. While recent substantial systematic efforts have been directed towards preserving the tangible aspects of this piece of Indian history; Arghya Bose identifies the roots of this loss not merely in the lack of heritage preservation, but in the more basic neglect towards the town’s history in Indian academics and scholarly pursuits. While he is appreciative of whatever little effort is being undertaken to save the tangible aspects of this heritage, Bose has almost always, since his days at school lamented, questioned and vehemently criticized the systematic obliteration of this history from our history books. This critic does not stop at mere criticisms, but goes on to put efforts towards addressing what he feels needs to be rectified. I read his efforts towards writing this book essentially in this context.

While Bose's inspirations for the writing of this book is most definitely personal, his methodology and work are extremely academic. Directed towards criticizing the inclination of identifying India's colonial past to merely the British efforts in the country, the book brings out to its readers the need to recognize other marginalized colonial experiences as well. Arguing that in order to construct a complete and matured understanding of colonial India, it is very necessary to study French India as well, Bose's book takes up the initiative of explaining why such an exercise is particularly important in academics today. Based on a systematic exploitation of books, documents and archives both in France and in Chandernagor, Bose argues for the recognition of the heterogeneity and nuances of the Indian colonial experiences by not only identifying and locating the particularities of Chandernagor's colonial experience, but also seeking to explain them. This has been done in the most systematic and well-informed manner possible.

This is precisely what makes this book a brilliant juxtaposition of narrative and analysis of Chandernagorian colonial history. Chronologically differentiated yet thematically coherent, this elementary, yet elegantly and neatly written series of essays, at once, serve the purposes of not only introducing its readers to this often overlooked piece of Indian history; but also answers some long-standing unanswered questions relating to the same.

It is important to realize that we are losing the memories of this wonderful little chapter of our country's history, and we are losing it fast. Any attempt to revive this narrative has to be urgently and

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immediately started, given the ever-diminishing number of archives and octogenarians who can narrate and directly relate us to the same. In this sense, this timely book, beautifully written and splendidly concise, is the perfectly compressed introduction to what I consider should be a more vigorous and vital field of study.

Basabi Pal (née Ghosh)

Chevalier dans

l'Ordre des Palmes académiques

Chandernagor

## **Acknowledgements**

A book of this sort can only be built on the foundation of innumerable debts of gratitude. In bringing about this book, the elementary scheme was to dwell on the presence of the vast archives at Institut de Chandernagor – the epicenter of the French establishment in Bengal. Most of these political and diplomatic documents are copies made in the nineteenth century, the originals of which are no longer present in India. And indeed, it is only a handful which has remained intact – the vast majority of it has been eaten on the edges, so fragile and brittle that they crumble instantaneously on touch. In such state of deterioration, with such few accessible materials and most of the references missing altogether, it would have been impossible to realize the existence of this book had it not been for the opportunity to visit SciencesPo Paris on an exchange programme – while the one person to thank indefinitely for braving immense odds and arranging this opportunity is Professor Madhuchanda Ghosh, Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Presidency University, Calcutta, the French Embassy in India is to be equally thanked for their generosity in funding me at this point of my work. Visits to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Archives d'Outre Mer, Aix-en Provence, had helped me ferret out materials far exceeding my expectations. A more institutionalized help came from and during my stay at SciencesPo Paris, Campus Euro-Américain de Reims - Monsieur Matthew Baker, in charge of the library at the Reims campus of SciencesPo, went to the extents of

getting copies of the books *The French in India, 1763-1816* and *The French in India: First Establishment and Struggle*, all the way from Calcutta. I particularly craved for the involvement of Professor Jacques Weber, Professeur émérite at the Université de Nantes, and felt ever-obliged and grateful when he so graciously responded to the information on my work by not only sending me a copy of his thesis on *Les Établissements français en Inde au XIXe siècle: 1816-1914* and many of his other very relevant articles that were of particular interest to the scope of this work, but also putting me in touch with other people who eventually contributed their fair share of help to this entire initiative. Back in India, Miss Sana Akhtar, the Sub-divisional officer of Chandernagor, looked not only into the technicalities of the accessing certain archives based in the town, but was also tremendously encouraging of this academic initiative.

In spite of all these initiatives, the writing of this book would have been further delayed had it not been for Professor Garima Dhabhai, who though unknowingly, gave me the idea of compiling all of the findings that I had amassed over the last couple of years in the form of a manuscript. It would be unfair not to thank the other faculty members in the Department of Political Science at Presidency University, Calcutta, for once I was finally decided to give shape to this book, I never hesitated to bother them, despite their hectic schedules, with the most trivial of problems that I experienced over the course of this entire exercise. And once the members of the French establishment in Calcutta in general and Mr. Amitava Das, in particular, were informed of my work, they sprung back to their usual cordially helpful selves, taking up initiatives and seeing to it that I tide over the technicalities of this travail in a very tranquil manner.

## Acknowledgements

At a personal plane, though very cliché, it is essential to acknowledge the fact that my parents and Jui had patiently borne with the disagreeable temperament that I often tend to develop when subject to deadlines. I am immensely thankful to them for that. And so has Sanchari Chakraborty, who, ever-composed in dealing with my impulsive disposition, went to the extents of upsetting her daily schedule numerous times just in order to ensure enough time for my work. I am not sure whether to appreciate or hate her self-possessed disposition, and she knows that.

A mere mention in the ‘acknowledgements’ section does no justice to the immense contributions of Prof. Basabi Pal, Head of the Department of French, Chandernagor College, and Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Palmes académiques, whose energetic enthusiasm for the town and kind encouragement for my work immensely inspired me to tide over the labourious procedure of compiling my findings into the manuscript of this book.





## Preface

*Jodi merja hotey chao, tobey Farashdangaye jao.*

*Kasta-pere dhuti chherey, kalo-perey nao...<sup>1</sup>*

[If you want to appear grandiose, Farashdanga is the place to be.

Take up the black bordered one instead of the typical scarlet dhoti...]

The quoting of such a romantic portrayal of a quaint town may, in the first place, seem quite an ostentatious way of starting a contemporary work on the currently almost inconsequential town of Chandernagor.<sup>2</sup> Such a position would be justified unless one is acquainted to the occurrence of a remarkably significant town of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries being reduced to nothing but a shady suburb of the megalopolis of Calcutta. It serves no purpose to inculcate the Chandernagorians or the local government for this ignorance towards Chandernagor's history, for it is from academic and intellectual endeavours that societal, economic and political initiatives stem. Our primary task, as scholars and academicians, is not merely to belong to a secluded elitist and intellectual community, but to generate attention in spheres we deem necessary. The academic world has mostly been blissfully negligent and unaware in this area, and this silent town has patiently borne this academic bias at primarily two levels. At the initial level, studies on Indian colonialism and nationalism, very naively, presuppose that the colonial experience in India is a homogenous one, the nuances of which can be successfully gauged by merely studying the British colonial experience;<sup>3</sup>

hence, essentially trivializing other already politically and territorially marginalized presences of the French, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Danish and the Austrians.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the very few academic efforts that has been undertaken with regard to the French colonial presence in India satisfy themselves by looking at Pondichéry mainly because of the presence and ready accessibility of academic literature and resources, again seeking to homogenize the French colonial experience itself, in all of the five major establishments which are not only distant with regard to geography, but also when it comes to their socio-cultural, political and economic structures – their basic physiognomy. This is what I will, throughout this work, term as the ‘tyranny of mainstreams’, which very obviously, has unpropitious effects in the realm of the social sciences – this is one of the most fundamental reasons behind this work. However, for now, let me dwell on elucidating the other reasons that equally advocate the importance of the currently undertaken initiative.

This chapter in the history of India – the chapter on colonialism, is closed, and in all likelihood, most definitely closed. What then, is the importance of a retelling of the French colonial experience in a long-forgotten town? The rationale behind it is, quite simply, several. The first of these is to try and do justice to the sheer scale of documentation that the French did in India in general, and in the establishment of Chandernagor in particular.<sup>5</sup> And here comes another academic shortcoming in the scholarship on Chandernagor – the very scarce number of published works that have tried looking into French Chandernagor had done so in a bid to portray Chandernagor as the setting against which the belle époque<sup>6</sup> of Dupleix had developed. Kali Chorone Kormorkar’s *Chandernagor et Dupleix*<sup>7</sup> and Georges Tailleur’s book *Chandernagor ou Le Lit de Dupleix*<sup>8</sup> are classical examples

in this regard. And such scholarship is not to be blamed, given that this period of the history of French India is indeed very fascinating. However, sixty-three years since the French left their chief establishment in Bengal, very little knowledge of their presence except for the above mentioned research area, actually remains. Thanks to the initiatives of the French in documenting their presence in Chandernagor, there exist vast archives in the town itself which, thanks to lack of initiatives in preservation, is almost in its ruins.<sup>9</sup> The deposits are extensive, mainly in the form of the archives of *La Compagnie des Indes et de l'administration royale*, the inter-establishment correspondences and the publications of *La Société de l'Histoire de l'Inde Française* founded in 1911 by the systematic efforts of M. Alfred Martineau.<sup>10</sup> Besides, there exists a good number of registers of protocols, deliberations, minutes of administrative meetings, reports of developmental projects and provisional constitutions. These documents, isolated, ignored and completely abandoned over the years, now face the danger of complete obliteration. Such documents destroyed is knowledge lost, and we need to act now before it is too late, not only towards preserving these existing archives,<sup>11</sup> but also producing a systematic retelling of this history in order to reach a broader, appreciative and enlightened audience who have little access to these documents.

While it has literally, quite materially, come down to the predicament of knowledge conservation and building, this is not the only concern behind taking up the initiative of this work. A more cognitive concern is to dispute the previously considered academic bent of homogenizing the colonial experience in India – that the mainstream British experience is largely seen as the standard which has to be studied, researched on, and retold in order to comprehend the discourse of colonialism in the

subcontinent. It is primarily, and largely the study of the colonial institutions, policies, and events within the British fold that satisfactorily completes the study of colonialism in India. Such an assumption is not only naïve, but also academically faulty, and this is precisely what I term as ‘the tyranny of mainstreams’. Such a notion essentially sits atop the Foucauldian project in ‘le savoir-pouvoir’ – if power uses knowledge to reproduce knowledge by moulding it in accordance to its interests, so has the power of majoritarianism of British colonial sway in the subcontinent produced the mainstream discourse of colonialism in India. Homogenizing in the social sciences, whatever be the context, is essentially a naïve scheme in order to avoid problematizing specific spheres of research.<sup>12</sup> While a lot has been spoken with regard to decolonizing the social sciences, it is absolutely imperative to realize that such ‘decolonizing’ of disciplines does not necessarily have to be situated within the framework of the dichotomy of the west and the rest, though this constitutes a chief slice of the project in its entirety – indeed, it cannot be expected of an individual academician to structurally operate within the west-rest dichotomy. A more immediately practical manner in which the language of ‘decentering’ the social sciences can be spoken is to break free from and problematize mainstream discourses and given concepts in a discipline. The call is indeed for critical intellectual creativity in trying to evolve alternative discourses of given concepts in a discipline. While such notions of ‘alternative discourses’ are often set to be posed as against the mainstream, it does not always necessarily have to be so – as a matter of fact, it could well be complimentary to the mainstream, contributing to further conceptual development. What is, however, absolutely imperative is for such exercises of the evolution of alternatives to be empirically grounded in historical experiences recognizably distinct from those which have

shaped the mainstream. Quite simply, this work is being undertaken not merely to develop a monograph on some episodes in the history of the French in Chandernagor, but to provide an effective intervention in the mainstream discourses on colonialism, colonial modernity and nationalism, which is quite regrettably, largely born out of considerations of solely the operation of British colonialism in India. In trying to provide a break from the mainstream British colonial discourse, the study also seeks to look into the possibility of the evolution of alternative discourses on colonialism, colonial modernity, and nationalism in the subcontinent. The experiences in Chandernagor provide an effective foundation on which to build the alternative discourses already spoken about.

The endmost of a set of reasons is, in all probability, the most elementary and straightforward of all, though it flows from the previous ones. It is mandatory to realize and accept that the French presence in India constitutes an integral and ineludible part of Indian history after all. It would be an academic crime to translate the marginalized presence of the French in India into a marginalized chapter in the subcontinent's history. This work is a trivial step in that direction – a step towards not only recognizing this marginalized episode of our colonial history but also evince how a study of these episodes contribute to a fuller and more evolved understanding of this juncture of India's past.

Before any further attempt is made to explicate the nature of this work, it is important that the largely untold story of the French in India be briefly retold. The French colonial experience in India is, in all likelihood, one of the most unique occurrences in modern colonial history, extraordinarily remarkable and perplexedly baffling at the same time. A colonial history that started even earlier than the British establishment in Calcutta, the

establishments of the French had risen to the exceptional heights of the Dupleixian epoch, as well seen the inordinate lows of brutal English sieges and occupation; and by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, had well acquainted themselves to being tossed to and fro between London and Paris. This turbulent history of French India, if at all a definitive point has to be given, started with the establishment of *La Compagnie française des Indes orientales*, under the resourceful enterprise of Cardinal Richelieu in 1642, and its reconstruction under Jean Baptiste Colbert in 1664. This is a history quite adventurous and exciting, however, one which does not excite the scope of this work. The work does delve deeper into the particularities of the predicament at Chandernagor a few pages later, howbeit, at this point, it suffices us to know that by the end of the Seven Years War and with the Treaty of Paris, 1763, Dupleix's regally ambitious project of 'giving India to France'<sup>13</sup> had reduced to France playing only a subsidiary role in five *petits comptoirs*<sup>14</sup>, under arrogant British supremacy. With the vast distances and differences in physiognomy weighing against the interests of the company, the French possessions in India divided themselves up into three administrative groups – 'le groupe des Côtes de Coromandel et d'Orixá' including Pondichéry, Karikal, Mazulipatam and Yanaon; 'le groupe de la Côte de Malabar', with Mahé and Calicut; that 'du Bengale', inclusive of Chandernagor, Cassimbazar, Balassore, Patna, Dacca.<sup>15</sup> The last group based in Bengal was the most important for the Company. For Bengal posed as not only the main market for its import goods, but also furnished the company with shiploads of oriental riches such as the linens of muslin, silk, metals, and opium – the richest of the company's cargos to mainland France. Chandernagor had risen to exceptional economic importance by centralizing all of these economic operations to itself, so much so, that the Company's oldest loge

at Surate was brought under the direct and immediate direction of Chandernagor. And it was well aware of this importance it commanded being situated in one of the most affluent regions of the subcontinent. With Dupleix enlarging and embellishing the town taking it to even greater commercial heights, and Law de Lauriston's ambitions of making Chandernagor the chief establishment in India, Chandernagor was already speaking a language of insubordination and independence while most of India had very little left of that spirit. This had eventually, but definitely helped shape the colonial discourse in the town as posed in stark contrast to most of the subcontinent – a narrative to which we shall eventually return in the latter half of this work.

The vocabulary of the colonial discourse that eventually developed in Chandernagor had plural manifestations of the empirical sort, spanning over the more than two and a half decades of French presence in the town<sup>16</sup>. The most basic of these manifestations was one in the socio-economic sphere – there was the massive influence of Vaishnavism in creating a more liberal and permissive social order in the town, one that effectively challenged Brahmanical orthodoxy, one that allowed for movement up the socio-economic ladder by means of trade and commerce. Most importantly, the revolution in Chandernagor had ushered in a new epoch of civic equality guaranteed by the 1791 Provisional Constitution of Chandernagor. This extended to the political domain under the reign of the Third Republic in France with the town enjoying the privilege of direct representation in the French Chamber of Deputies by popularly elected representatives.<sup>17</sup> This, along with several other socio-economic and political developments standing in downright contrast to the mainstream British colonial experience had additional and eventual implications in shaping the very nature of nationalism in



Chandernagor, come the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A methodological justification of picking the experience of Chandernagor in particular in order to suggest the possibility of deciphering an alternative discourse of colonialism, colonial modernity and nationalism is the similarity of rudimentary socio-cultural physiognomy that it shared with Calcutta, the home to British paramountcy in the subcontinent for most of India's colonial history – thereby necessitating the exigency to look for other independent variables as possible explanations to the entirely different language that the French and the Chandernagorians spoke in the course of their colonial interaction.

An appraisal of the literature already developed in this area is possible only when there has been a substantial academic initiative in this direction. What I had earlier termed as 'the tyranny of mainstreams' has led to scholars contentedly developing the current epistemology on Indian colonial history based only on thoroughly exhaustive studies of British experiences. The very little work that has been done on the French existence in India has mainly been concentrated in, and on Pondichéry. This is not to presume the absence of any academic initiative altogether, for there is still, the existence of a few strands of works that have been undertaken on Chandernagor. The earliest of these date back to the last decades of the nineteenth century, primarily emerging out of the Anglo-French interactions in the subcontinent and out of the initiatives of British colonial officers to document the same. Colonel George Bruce Malleson and his books *History of the French in India*<sup>18</sup> and *Final French Struggle in India and on the Indian Seas*<sup>19</sup> are the examples to cite in this regard. A second, more substantial strand is produced largely by the colonial French efforts to preserve the history of their

presence in India. An exemplar in this regard would be the initiatives of M. Alfred Martineau in the first and the second decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in setting up what came to be known as *La Société de l'Histoire de l'Inde Française*. M. Martineau devoted himself to the cause of deciphering, arranging and reconstructing all the pieces of this precious history in the form of four extensively, very well documented volumes titled *Dupleix et l'Inde Française*<sup>20</sup>, along with other sizeable works. The establishment of an institutionalized society in this direction had indeed paid off, eventually sparking an academic movement marked with resurgence of interest towards the study of this Indo-French past – notable efforts in this direction had also been contributed by scholars like E. Gaudart<sup>21</sup> and Marguerite V. Labernadie. Increasingly indulging themselves in this rarely talked of and studied history, the society's efforts ranged from translations<sup>22</sup> to publishing administrative records such as extracts from the minutes of the Superior Council of Pondichéry since 1701 and diplomatic documents on the relations of governors of French possessions in India with the native powers during the course of the eighteenth century. The *Société de l'Histoire des Colonies Française* had also made occasional contributions towards the recording and study of this history, a foremost example being Eugène Guénin's detailed account of the loss of French foothold in Bengal following the Battle of Chandernagor in 1757.<sup>23</sup> These thematic works, with very few exceptions, invariably dedicated a slice of their book towards discussing the predicament in Chandernagor. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these works were the products primarily of French colonial initiatives based in Pondichéry, and this implied that the colonialist's bias based in and for Pondichéry also seeped into such accounts. Furthermore, these accounts were hardly academic, being more of the administrative and diplomatic type,

and often quite simply reproduction of the original documents published without notes of any sort. The guiding rationale behind bringing forth these publications was very clearly to preserve those documents which may lose themselves eventually, over time. Whatever the nature of these documents, and the guiding motivations behind these efforts, it is this unparalleled service that prepares the ground for any inquiry into this episode of Indian history, and for which we must remain gratefully indebted.

Another strand of academic scholarship bases itself on the efforts of Bengali scholars based in Chandernagor or Calcutta – scholarly individuals who have been intimately familiar to the French establishment at Chandernagor. Influenced and affected mostly at a personal level by the French experiences at Chandernagor, yet, daunted by the labyrinthine history of the French presence in the town, such works usually relied on the archival documents and popular history to come up with extremely detailed studies of one very particular aspect or episode of Chandernagorian history. Harihar Seth, administrator of the town for some time and local historian, is the foremost name to take in this regard. To mention other names, there was Kali Chorone Kormorkar's *Dupleix et Chandernagor* and Siba Pada Sen's *The French in India*, both erudite scholars belonging to the last century. A final strand is one of sheer romanticism – this has survived the centuries and is largely the strand that the very few contemporary works take. Orientalist romanticism about Chandernagor had existed since the early days of the French presence in the town – a certain romantic obsession with this exotic land in the Far East Indies, most notable in the outpouring of French literature set in Chandernagor in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the academic rungs, such romanticism started manifesting itself primarily in the form of the

numerous works retelling of the governance of the French possessions in India under Dupleix, ‘...*la plus belle periode de cette histoire...*’<sup>24</sup> Romanticism about this town was not only rooted in French curiosity about this exotic land but also an idyllic portrayal of the town in native folk culture as a queer little space with a liberally permissive environment and a gaudy lifestyle. Contemporary studies manifest this romanticism in the manner and language in which the narrative of colonial Chandernagor’s fundamentally different physiognomy is highlighted placing it beside British Calcutta. Phrases like ‘a colony that fought the British’<sup>25</sup> and works like Sumanta Bannerjee’s *A Tale of Two Cities under Colonial Rule: Calcutta and Chandernagor*<sup>26</sup> carry this subtle air of romanticism. And such scholarship is in no way to be blamed for much of this attitude is born out of the very unique predicament that French Chandernagor was set in.

Notwithstanding this detailed elucidation of the scholarship spanning nearly two centuries, this initiative seeks to satisfy a literature gap noticeably massive and unprecedentedly distinct. For all the works that have been discussed above and their unmentioned likes are products of initiatives undertaken by colonial officers stationed in the subcontinent and more contemporarily, the prerogative of Bengali historians. Chandernagor, hence, had developed a history of its own, the narrative of which, thanks to all the socio-political differences it shared with India, had emerged to be quite a distinct one. It needs to be appreciated, however, that it does not suffice the epistemology on French Chandernagor to just indicate or realize these differences; the aim, indeed, is to work towards explaining them – the need, hence, is to evolve an alternative colonial discourse based on the experiences at Chandernagor that were

principally different from the British one. For a colonial discourse that has been developed solely out of the British presence in India cannot be superimposed on and to explain French Chandernagor – an attempt to do so will but make Chandernagor's differing colonial experiences appear anomalously incongruous, encouraging further romanticization of the town in the scholarship to come.

What are then, the determinants which explain the very occurrence of a fundamentally different socio-political physiognomy in colonial Chandernagor as compared to the rest of India at the primary level, and to Pondichéry at a second plane? And to further the scope of the work, while it is definitely possible to suggest, out of these determinants, the evolution of alternative discourses on colonialism, colonial modernity and nationalism based in Chandernagor, an inescapably riveting question to ask here is, what, if any, led to the marginalization of this history, this discourse in the epistemology of Indian colonialism. These precisely are the problématiques of the thesis. Founding the entire argument of this work on the existence of intellectual traditions fundamentally different in France than that in Britain, the hypothesis claims, at the primary level, that such differing intellectual traditions, aided by specific particularities of the French presence in India influenced the formation of a dissimilar, rather divergent form of colonial modernity in French India in general, and Chandernagor in particular – very non-identical to its British counterpart in the rest of the subcontinent. Primarily under the influence of such varying colonial modernities, as well as certain other factors that shall be consequently elucidated on, the colonial stage in Chandernagor was set in a completely different context as opposed to the mainstream narrative and understanding of British colonialism in the rest of the

subcontinent, and from which emerged the fundamentally different ways in which colonialism, and in turn, anti-colonial nationalism operated in French Chandernagor. This uniquely distinct discourse on colonialism was only fated to become a marginalized history in Indian academics, given that it could not be accommodated in any post-1947 historiography in general, and the dominant nationalist one in particular. In plain words, while there have definitely been particularities in the colonial experience based in Chandernagor, this experience was over time, left unexplored, less talked of, and eventually marginalized primarily because Chandernagor's unique political and civic experiences either could not be accommodated in and explained by mainstream narratives on Indian colonialism or ran antithetical to the projects of such historiographies.

As far as the general scheme of the book is concerned, it has quite spontaneously and systematically fallen into place, given the chronological framework of the history of the French presence in Chandernagor. This has indeed made penning down this thesis much more agreeable, for the chronology of the arguments made in the thesis readily, though not without surprise, coincides with the way colonial history has been shaped in the town. And this requires further elucidation, for all purposes. The study, as it proceeds further, is primarily subdivided into five chapters. ***Introducing a Modernity of the French Sort in Chandernagor*** harping on the contemporary socio-political contours is an absolute imperative given that it is undeniably a marginalized, less studied and less spoken of episode in the epistemology on Indian colonialism. The thesis goes on to consider ***La Revolution à Chandernagor*** as the moment when Chandernagor stood at the crossroads of modernity – while the entire subcontinent was being introduced, and at the same time, developing a very British

influenced form of colonial modernity, the Chandernagorians, come the defining moment of the revolution, were exposed to the development of a modernity somewhat moderately different from the mainstream British one. The chapter deliberates on how the guiding ideas of the revolution in metropolitan France proffered an overarching framework for the evolution a modernity in Chandernagor nuancedly dissimilar to its British counterpart. While this meant that everyone rightly recognized in the revolution a radically liberal spirit, it is equally important to realize that this liberalism was yet to permeate the domain of politics. For it was not yet believed that all men are equals – the white colonialist in Chandernagor was still impregnated with the prejudices of his time. But the one step that the revolution in Chandernagor did achieve at this step, towards a more democratic socio-political system is civic equality of sorts. Elucidating on how contemporary French political thought in general and that of the revolution, in particular, drew a sharp distinction between civic and political equality, the chapter is interested in arguing that deification of the natural rights of man, and hence, civic equality, was the fundamental intellectual project of the 1789 revolution in metropolitan France. The supremely absolute manifestation of this line of thought was manifested in the *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* in the same year – and elements of this intellectual inclination are translated and evidently decipherable from the 1791 constitution of Chandernagor.

*Democratizing the Colony* revives the narrative from the moment of the establishment of the Third Republic in mainland France and accomplishes what could not be realized in the previous episode – the emergence of political equality. While the preceding chapters argue for the need to recognize the different

trajectories that modernities in British India and French Chandernagor took, this chapter elucidates on the more concrete forms in which such differences manifested themselves in the evolution of a colonial policy entirely different from the mainstream British one that dominated contemporary politics in the Indian subcontinent, and to this day, dictates the academic discourse on the same. Drawing primarily from the very ideas that went into the setting up of representative political institutions in the town, and the emergence of popular electoral politics, the essay seeks to argue that such measures, though not without ‘undemocratic’ flaws, must be contextualized in the contemporary historical moment – it has to be considered that such moves towards a more representative political system in Chandernagor came at a time when the British Indian subcontinent was just experiencing a transition from the raj of the East India Company to that of the English monarch who did but assume the title of the ‘Empress of India’. Put this in contrast to the French colonial policy under the Third Republic adopting a policy ‘directed at obliterating all differences between colonies and mainland France by endowing them with the same administrative, judicial, social and other institutions at giving their inhabitants full civic rights and obliging them to the same duties’ as citizens in metropolitan France<sup>27</sup>. Asserting that there remains a fundamental qualitative difference in the forms and structures of colonies operating under a republic to that of the ones assuming the form of empires under a monarch, this particular reflection is sought to be elucidated on by not only contrasting Chandernagor of the late nineteenth century to the rest of the subcontinent experiencing the British discourse of colonialism, but also against the strikingly dissimilar colonial policies of the Napoleonic years. In short, while on the one hand, the representative political structures of late nineteenth century Chandernagor could definitely be qualified as limited if



judged by the modern and contemporary discourses on the same, it stands as the ‘beau idéal’ of political liberalism operating in a colonial framework, in an era which celebrated the European’s supremacy, while lamenting yet justifying and seeking to legitimize the white man’s burden.

Why did Chandernagor remain largely unaffected and indeed, pose secluded from the entirety of the radically nationalist feelings that was rocking the entire subcontinent in general, and the unbelievably proximate Calcutta, at the start of the twentieth century? Why was there the distinguished absence of any substantial activities of violence against the French establishment based in Chandernagor when the town itself was the ‘sore’ in British imperial supremacy in the subcontinent, the cradle of terrorist tumult against the British establishment in Calcutta? And why did Chandernagor itself not see the rise of a popular anti-French pro-independence movement pre-1947? These are questions that need to be answered, and the chapter dedicated to *Problematizing the Popular Discourse on Nationalism in India* does precisely that. Put it simply, while the two preceding chapters elucidate on the very concrete possibilities of recognizing the existence of alternative discourses on colonial modernity and colonialism, it is the thrust of this chapter to argue that from these non-identical forms of colonial modernities and structures of colonialism evolved a variety of nationalism fundamentally non-identical from that of the one which stormed the subcontinent until 1947. The concluding chapter talks of translating *Marginalized Discourses to Marginalized Histories*, and how Chandernagor is an exemplar in this regard. For, the essay thus goes on to elucidate, the experiences in colonial Chandernagor were in itself ‘othered’ in Indian academics because it could not be accommodated in the Indian colonial

historiography that was largely developed basing on the British presence in the subcontinent.

It is important to acknowledge that this work does not, in any way, do justice to the potential of the vast and rich archives available in and on Chandernagor. It is but an *academic* minuscule derived from and built on the massively extensive *political* and *diplomatic* documents already available. In trying to answer the questions asked in the form of the problématique, the book seeks to locate the key points of departure of the French experience in Chandernagor when posed alongside the British experience in most parts of the subcontinent, and elucidate on them in some trivial detail. An addition of further and more intricate details, along with the evolution of an even more nuanced understanding of the research area that is sought to be covered would only be possible with further academic research. Nevertheless, what this work does, at this stage, is demonstrate the crying need to start working on these archives before they lose themselves to the vagaries of time. The time is wanting, the sea vast and the exploration yet to begin.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in the journal *Basantak*, vol. 1, no. 5. 1873.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to comment on the nomenclature at this stage. The town is spelt in a myriad ways like Chandernagore, Chandannagar and Chandernagar, all of which are later developments. Since it was formally spelt as Chandernagor while still a part of French India, and since this work concerns itself with studying the town as a part of French India, the spelling of ‘Chandernagor’ has been given a natural and obvious preference of choice over the remaining others.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to presuppose the derivation of ‘one’ British experience from the existence of one uncontested historiography of British colonialism in Indian academics. Indeed, studies on British colonialism in India are so evolved that there have been studies elucidating on the nuances of the British presence in India throughout the subcontinent. For instance, the subaltern school problematizes the taken for granted homogenous mass of experience derived out of this colonial interaction by talking of the fragments that the dominant nationalist historiography marginalizes – the peasants, dalits and women. And *that* is precisely the complaint of this work. While the colonial interactions of the British in India have so much been worked upon, not only in various historiographies and the political sciences, but also in the context of disciplines like sociology and anthropology, which has largely capacitated Indian academics to evolve a very matured understanding of the British presence in India, the French presence has largely been neglected, only limited to occasional narratives by historians. What this work aims at is to look at Chandernagor’s history as a fragment of colonial experience that needs to be recovered – and it seeks to justify the value of this exercise by locating points of departure in the Chandernagorian experience that cannot be accommodated in or explained by any of the existing historiographies that has developed itself primarily out of a study of the British presence in the subcontinent.

<sup>4</sup> The Austrian presence in the Indian Oceans was very limited in terms of space and time. It was an unsuccessful attempt of Habsburg Monarchy to colonize the Nicobar Islands, in 1778. The islands had previously been a Danish colony and Austria’s colonial initiative in the islands was based on the assumption that Denmark had abandoned its claims to the same. By 1783, the last of the Austrian colonists had left.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to value the presence of a certain documented history over ones that are not documented, but only to see a critical

study of the available documents as a mere starting point of an effort towards building a historiography that could explain the colonial encounters and presence of the French in Chandernagor.

<sup>6</sup> This expression can be literally translated to ‘The Golden Epoch’ of Chandernagorian history, which the existing scholarship identifies to have coincided with the time of Dupleix’s governorship of Chandernagor, for it is only around this time and under the leadership of Dupleix that Chandernagor attained its political and commercial peaks.

<sup>7</sup> Kormorkar, Kali Chorone, Chandernagor et Dupleix, Calcutta: 1963.

<sup>8</sup> Tailleur, Georges, Chandernagor ou le lit de Dupleix, Africa Nostra, 1979.

<sup>9</sup> While most archives in India are in general poorly preserved, the lack of interest in French colonialism in India and in Chandernagor in particular has largely led to almost complete abandonment of these archives. And the poor state of these archives further discourages academic research in this regard. This gives out a particular sense of urgency in the context of the almost unworked on field of French colonialism in Chandernagor.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Albert Martineau (1859–1945) was a renowned historian and colonial administrator in the French Colonial Empire. He served as the Governor of French India for two terms – 1910 – 1911, and 1913 – 1918. For more details, see Weber, Jacques, Gouverneur et historien de l’Inde française : Alfred Martineau (1859-1945) , in Patrice Morlat ed., Les grands commis de l’Empire colonial français, Actes du colloque de Clermont-Ferrand du 14 octobre 2005, Les Indes savantes, Paris: 2010, pp. 109-151.

<sup>11</sup> This is not to over-emphasize on the importance of archival knowledge, but only to say that they are an important source to start with, in the context of almost no existing academic

scholarship in this direction. To ensure that the colonial imperative of knowledge is not reproduced in such an endeavor, it is indeed necessary that a critical reading of these archival documents be undertaken – but that only comes at a later stage when enough academic work has already been done on which to base the evolution of nuanced understandings of this experience.

<sup>12</sup> Simply put, what is necessary is to contest the epistemology on Indian colonialism being solely derived out of British experiences in the subcontinent. A manner in which this tendency can effectively be challenged is with the emergence of informed scholarship on the French colonial encounters in Chandernagor.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *Histoire de France*, Vol. XV, pp. 307-308.

<sup>14</sup> With the final return of the French possessions in India in 1814, what could be identified as French India was reduced to the five principal establishments of Pondichéry, Chandernagor, Mahé, Yanon and Karaikal, and eight other loges at Surate, Kalikut, Mazulipatam, Balassore, Jougdia, Dacca, Cassimbazar and Patna; covering an expanse of approximately 200 sq. miles scattered throughout the subcontinent.

<sup>15</sup> Labernadie, *La révolution et les Etablissements Français dans l'Inde 1790-93*, Imprimerie Moderne, Pondichery, 1930, pp. VI.

<sup>16</sup> The French establishment in Chandernagor was founded by Bourreau Deslandes in 1690 and the French, with the exception of three breaks in the form of English occupation (1757-63, 1778-83 and 1793-1802) stamped their presence in the town until their final exit in 1954.

<sup>17</sup> The lower chamber of the French parliament consisting of representatives elected through census suffrage up until 1875 when the system of representation was replaced by universal suffrage.

<sup>18</sup> Malleson, History of the French in India, WMH Allen and Co, London, 1893.

<sup>19</sup> Malleson, Final French Struggles in India and on The Indian Seas, WMH Allen & Co, London, 1878.

<sup>20</sup> Martineau, Dupleix et l'Inde Française. La Société de l'Histoire de l'Inde Française, Pondichéry, 1923-29.

<sup>21</sup> The most notable work of Gaudart in this direction is the very detailed Catalogue Des Manuscrits Des Anciennes Archives de l'Inde Française in eight volumes, 1922-36.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, vol. X

<sup>23</sup> Guénin , Chute de Chandernagor et Perte du Bengale, Société de l'Histoire des Colonies Française, Paris: 1914.

<sup>24</sup> '...the most beautiful period in this history...', Preface in Labernadie, La Révolution et les Etablissements Français dans l'Inde, by E. Gaudart, pp. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ganesan V.B., A Colony that fought the British, The Hindu, July 2, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Bannerjee, Sumanta, A Tale of Two Cities under Colonial Rule: Calcutta and Chandernagor, Occasional Publication 39, India International Centre, New Delhi.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Martin, Lexique de la colonisation française, Paris, 1988, pp. 190.